

Essays On Quality Learning

Teachers' Reflections On Classroom Practice

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3 - "Dear Class"

Susan Handelman

You see, I can no longer write a "book"; everything now turns into a letter, since I need to see the "other."

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)¹

Dear fellow teacher:

You were probably expecting me to begin this essay more formally. I did, in fact, begin it that way. But since what I want to tell you is how the simple, ordinary daily act of letter writing has transformed my teaching, I decided to practice what I will preach right from the start. Here, by the way, is how this essay began when I wrote it in a more conventional, non-epistolary style:

For many years, I struggled as a teacher to find a way to make my students more active in discussion, more fluent in their writing, more responsible for their learning. Which of us has not? As a professor of English, I have been blessed with relatively small classes and students who like to read and write. And yet, despite my many classroom innovations and experiments with small group work and collaborative learning, I was never quite satisfied.

This opening is good enough in its own way, but which paragraph engages you more? Had I been able to address this with your own name, and write it based on a personal history of mutual acquaintance, which would entice you to read further? And which do you suspect was easier and more enjoyable for me to write? These are rhetorical questions, of course. We all love receiving personal letters. In such writing, I acknowledge the flesh-and-blood you as my worthy dialogue partner; I reach out to you where you are, make my plea for connection, or pose my complaint. I can say things that I might not be able to express orally either because they are uncomfortable or complex, or because it is hard to come up with just the right words on the spur of the moment and you have time and space to absorb and respond, in the way you choose.

Now I hope it's beginning to become clear how this applies to the classroom. For isn't that intimate dialogical engagement with each other what learning and teaching are meant to be about? That is what the first great pedagogue, Socrates, tried to teach us long ago, although he did not write letters, but went about orally interrogating people. That technique, though, put them on the spot and irritated many of them. For so often in the Platonic dialogues, while Socrates "professes" his own ignorance, he really has the deck all stacked in his favor and knows just where he wants that interlocutor to go. Real dialogue involves a certain open-endedness, a lack of knowing

where it will lead, a sense mutual discovery and reciprocity, a sense that the other could really teach me.

Recent "postmodern" literary and cultural theory have also stressed the social and dialogical nature of knowledge: knowledge is created through the conversations we have with the communities of interpreters whom we try to persuade with our arguments. And we all speak idealistically of University "community," of our commitment to free expression and "critical" thinking, of "empowering" our students, of "appreciating diversity," of the importance of faculty-student communication. But all too often, despite these worthy goals, the large State University is a lonely, fragmented, and anxiety-ridden place for both faculty and students.

So, again, what does letter writing have to do with all this? For me and my students it has been a way precisely to create that community in the classroom, that intimate dialogue of persons, that engaged critical and creative thinking that leads to wonder, discovery, mutual respect, and sparkling discussion and lively writing.... Not always, I admit, but much of the time. I always find myself somewhat irritated and skeptical whenever I read a "triumphalist account" of a pedagogical technique. Nothing always works well, and every class has its own idiosyncrasies that make last semester's brilliant innovation a sudden flop. But I can say, that after ten years of experience with this technique on both graduate and undergraduate levels, it has become the cornerstone of my teaching; and my students unfailingly cite it in evaluations as one of the best parts of the course.

It all originated ten years ago when I was trying to solve my pedagogical problems by teaching a graduate seminar on "Literary Theory and the Teaching of Literature." My graduate students and I would try out experiments in teaching by constructing "mini-lessons." Each week, one of the students would give a mini-lesson and we would role play the target audience of undergraduates. To process it all, I asked the students afterwards to write a memo to the "Teacher of the Week," giving feedback on how it felt to be the "student" of the lesson, what went well, what not so well, and suggestions for change. And I asked them to make copies of these memos for the whole seminar so we would all benefit from the suggestions. The memos evolved into wonderfully interactive dialogues.

One of the students in that seminar, at the time an award-winning Maryland high school English teacher, pointed out to me that, in fact, these "memos" had become letters, and persuaded me from then on to stop having students write "journals" in all my classes, and convert to this form of "communally published letters." I am eternally grateful for this advice to Mary Alice Delia, who went on to write her Ph.D. thesis with me, which also includes a chapter on letter writing, *Killer English: Postmodern Theory and the High School Classroom*, 1991.

Over the years, I have come to refine and use this technique as follows: on the first day of the semester, I divide my students into letter writing groups, for example, Groups A,B,C,D. On the syllabus, I designate which day each group will write. Each student within a Group writes his or her own letter, and depending on the size of the class, each Group will write several times during the semester. I explain, just as I did above, why I am asking them to write letters instead of journals, or abstracts, or other forms of conventional academic writing with which they are familiar. (By the way, I still do require final projects and term papers in more traditional modes. The letters often provide the seeds of those essays, but these other projects almost never have the same verve, eloquence, or creative insight; the prose returns to the perfunctory and dull).

I tell my students first to write a letter to someone in the assigned reading - a character, or the author, or a critic, or to another student in the class... or to me, or in the voice of a character or author, and so forth. Secondly, I instruct them to make copies of their letter for the entire class which we will then read and discuss in class each time. In effect, this means that they are "getting published" immediately with instantaneous response by a group of peers. (I realized in retrospect that this exerts a subtle kind of pressure on students; they tend to be much less willing to embarrass themselves with sloppy work in front of their peers than they are to give the professor something slap dash. Of course, it also makes them keep up with the reading as well). A third crucial element is that I also write letters with and to the class, trying to model a combination of serious thought with a warm, personal, playful voice; and so I also become part of the democratic melange of voices.

Let me try within my space limitations here to give just a few samples from student letters. First, a few caveats. In a way, the letters are like family slides from a long vacation, which are fascinating and wonderful for all who were on the trip, but can become a bit tedious to pore over for those who weren't there. In any given class through the course of a semester, the topics, tone, and rhetoric range from the sublime to the satiric, the analytical to the angry, the perplexed to the passionate. Since I am also writing this essay for a broad audience, I can't excerpt from letters which deal in analytical detail with unfamiliar literary readings or theories specific to my academic field. But be assured that many of the theoretical and thematic questions which I as the teacher prepare to raise for class discussion inevitably come out in the letters. And these issues are now much more interesting and compelling for the students because "Maria" or "Dave" has raised them, and not me. And now Maria and Dave have a stake in these issues and something articulate to say in class as well. (One of the best descriptions of a certain bad teacher I ever read was: "He threw answers like stones at students who never had any questions.")

The first letter I can't but help quote in its entirety. It is one of the most personal and came late in the semester from an average student in an English Department Senior Seminar on the subject "Literature and Ethics." It was written after the class read a Vietnam war story by Tim O'Brien called "How to Tell a True War Story."

Dear Uncle Milt:

I guess I can say I never understood you. I never understood why the entire family tippy-toed around you like an explosive waiting to kill. I never understood why simple political discussion at the dinner table had to turn sour every Thanksgiving. I never understood why certain songs from the seventies playing in the car would send you into a deep trance. I never understood why everyone else's dilemmas were "trivial" and "insignificant" to you. I never understood why every politician was "crooked" and "corrupt." And I never did understand why you refused to send your kids to summer camp because of a silly thing called Color War.

I used to watch movies about you: "Platoon", "Born on the Fourth of July" and "Full Metal Jacket" to name a few. I never could piece it together. You made it home! You have a family! No one ever had to write your sister, my grandmother, a letter explaining the circumstances of your unfortunate and untimely death. Every time I saw you at a family gathering I wanted to shake you and knock some sense into you. Why do you ruin every holiday? Why do you always have that look on your face when the turkey is being carved?

My questions have been answered [by Tim O'Brien]. He insists that a true war story is one that embarrasses you, one that makes it difficult to decipher truth from falsity, one that, in one's safe little world, is unbelievable, one that has no end. Upon reading his accounts, I have made peace with you, in my own heart. I now realize there will always be a struggle within you, you will always fight the instinct to tell us, your family, a true war story. You have, for all these years, vowed to keep the lives of your loved ones sheltered and protected by not polluting our heads with the horrible images of Nam. Don't tell us what we don't want to hear. I'm disgusted. Not about you not telling us; about us not wanting to hear.

Milt, I'm a different person now. I'm not the kid who hid behind my mother's skirt to hide from you. What I'm saying is that I'm not afraid of you, nor the war stories. I'd like to do more than hear you. I'd like to listen to you. I'd be delighted to know my Uncle Miltie.

Where do I see ever such writing from my students in their conventional work? Such intimate engagement with the material, such passion, such grace? And how often do students ever hear each other speak that way in class? As a teacher, there is little I could have done in a lecture or class discussion to make that story as powerful to her and the rest of the class as writing that letter did . . . and I hope she sent it.

Needless to say, a letter like that can come only toward the end of a semester if the class has gone well, and if mutual respect, trust and openness have developed among us. By no means are the letters all so personal and eloquent. The next quote I offer is from the other side of the spectrum. It comes from an undergraduate who loved to write parodic-satirical letters, often decorated with graphics. In this excerpt, he writes in the persona of a Hollywood producer named "Darren Star" and sends it to the late nineteenth century novelist Kate Chopin, whose novel, *The Awakening* (1899), we had been reading. The novel is about an unfulfilled woman named Edna Pontellier who is trapped in an unhappy bourgeois marriage in stifling New Orleans society. She can find no way out for herself, and eventually commits suicide. Here "Darren Star" writes to Kate Chopin with advice about how he wants to buy and update her story of Edna Pontellier for television:

We envision a whole new mid-Twenties-Generation-X-Velveeta-bourgeois Pseudo Drama based on your character of Edna Pontellier. Here's the plan, Kate . . . we see: Edna walking out on her stereotypically insensitive husband and moving to a lovely apartment complex in Los Angeles . . . first of all, Edna would become a struggling fashion designer (we would have to alter her wardrobe from lace peignoirs to spandex halter tops and booty shorts) . . .

Here is a more typical serious excerpt from an undergraduate written to the author of the textbook on poetry analysis we had just finished:

This is what I used to think of poems: you read it; it's short; it ends. And you're left thinking, "that was it?" . . . [Now] what I love about poetry is its power. I picture it like this: if a novel is lemonade, a poem is a lemon. Yeah, yeah I know it sounds funny, but let me explain. A novelist spends two hundred or more pages slowly building on his themes and characters, and then leaving the reader feeling as if he just finished a nice, tall, cold, one...A poet concentrates everything the novelist took such pains to build up, leaving only the very heart, the very sour of the sour left . . . A novel leaves the reader with ideas

and themes; a poem leaves images so vivid they feel like personal memories.

Whatever their tone and style, reading and writing letters over the course of a semester creates a special kind of cohesiveness and intimacy in a class. And our students are so desperately hungry for that deeper connection with each other and with their teachers. Why doesn't the standard method of oral discussion fulfill that need? Jane Thompkins, in her extraordinary memoir about teaching, *A Life in School*, writes:

From the teacher's point of view, the classroom is a place of opportunity The great example of student participation in the learning process is class discussion. From the teacher's perspective class discussion constitutes freedom . . . instead of the teacher talking, the students talk But one day my cousin . . . and I were talking about teaching - she is both a lifelong teacher and an actress, whose view of the classroom is sensitive to its theatricality. She started to mimic what happens when students talk in class, and a new vision of classroom dynamics opened up for me. She raised her hand and began to wave it, her voice filled with anxiety: "Am I smart?" she said. "Am I really smart? Am I the smartest?" . . . In class discussion, students compete with one another for the teacher's approval There are many ways to fail.²

So true. We teachers forget what it is like to sit in those seats. In a private e-mail message to me, an extremely bright student in one of my classes, with an honors double major in a science and literature, and a 4.0 average wrote:

I've never really known any of the other students in my classes or had the opportunity to befriend them. I often find the seminar setting, which would seem conducive to that, instead leads to a greater sense of isolation for me as I am not typically part of the group and do not have the history together that many of my classmates do. Yet in this instance, I feel that we all had an opportunity to get to know each other without being overwhelmed by competition or insecurity

In part, this was because the letter writing makes every one a participant, gives everyone a voice, even those who are shy or afraid to speak, or insecure. Moreover, I use the letters as a means for students to get to know each other better by having them read their letters out loud, and discuss them in small groups. The batch of letters can, however, be overwhelming, but there are many ways to deal with this problem. They can be read at the beginning of the class silently, but I've found it's much more effective and efficient to have each person read his or hers aloud in turn. This suggestion, in fact, came from the students. It is wonderful to hear the special inflections with which each person reads; that gives new depth and resonance to each letter. Class size is a large factor; if time becomes a problem, the letters can also be taken home to be read and prepared for comment at the beginning of the next class. Students also usually need some guidance about the main themes of the batch as well as a brief warm-up period of discussing the letters in pairs, or small groups before we can move to a whole group discussion.

But even the letters themselves can become a form of competition and insecurity. Graduate students are especially prone to "showing off their knowledge" and fighting for a place at the top of the roost at the beginning of the semester; undergraduates will often begin by writing in stilted ways, not trusting the teacher or each other. That is why as the professor I try very hard to write letters with them which show that the aim is to write *to* and *for*, not *at* each other. So often, academic

discourse is either a stinging "attack" on a position, a righteous "defense" of a position, or a performative display of one's knowledge. And so much academic writing is turgid, clotted, like "swimming through cold porridge" as someone once put it. Our students model this in the awkward manner of all novices, both in their writing and classroom discourse.

I am resisting mightily here my ingrained academic inclination to whip up a storm of footnotes and references. I do want to note, though, that letters are somehow "easier" and more enjoyable to write because of what literary theorists would call their clear "rhetorical stance." This term comes from the title of an influential article by the eminent literary critic Wayne Booth. As Booth points out, most college students have no sense of a real audience when they write, nor can they find the proper tone of voice - for after all, the reader is the instructor with the red pencil and grade book, and that is not a "real" audience. So students write in the pedantic, disembodied voices that suppress any personal relation to the reader, or between the writer and the subject, and lose any sense of what the writing is *for*.³ They "do their job" of course work, but it is all too often disconnected from their hearts and lives. They are often so lonely. A graduate student in an introductory methods course, wrote in one of her letters:

The ultimate conflict in the classroom is, who we are when we encounter and are swallowed up by the artificial world of academia, our fleshly selves slumbering in hard chairs, and how does this strange ritual come to mean anything to us. Our private lives occur in terrifying places where we grapple alone with the impossibility of certitude or peace. Teaching these conflicts means addressing that, opening the windows of academia and letting life seep in like air.

And faculty are also lonely. A philosophy professor friend of mine who also writes on theological issues once bemoaned to me that he could not find a community in which he felt at home: his only real "community" are the people he writes his academic essays for, and who come to the conferences he runs. I responded, "But, you know, that is an *audience*, not a community." Despite our attempts to create classroom and University "community," we often are really only "audiences" for each other's monologues. "Community" is something I conceive to be more like family: people whom you are thrown into a group with, but to whom you owe something, and who are there for you in all your ups and downs. They can give you a hard time, but they also witness and help and confirm you throughout your vicissitudes. And that, I suppose, is as good as any a definition of what I aim my classroom to be. Learning anything new, as we all know, is full of vicissitudes. As are the lives of our students, who I am always astonished to find, are dealing with the whole gamut of adult pain and woe: financial problems, family fractures, illness, drugs, death.

Jane Thompkins again says it well when she writes that despite all our professed academic goals of critical thinking, or social change, or transmission of cultural heritage, or professional training,

I have come to think that teaching and learning are not preparation for anything but are the thing itself . . . The classroom is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we cherish. The kind of classroom one creates is the acid text of what it is one really stands for. And I wonder, in the case of college professors, if performing their competence in front of other people is all that amounts to in the end.⁴

A student in one of my graduate seminars on "Literary Theory and the Teaching

of Literature" expressed a similar sentiment about how creating community inside and outside the classroom is one of the major reasons why we teach at all. I wrote back to her the following:

Dear Maria,

[You wrote in your last letter]: "In talking about literature, we can talk about the human need for communication, interaction, relationship with (an) 'other(s)' - all of which is crucial to the survival of any community....For in spite of all the debates about exactly where, when, what or if meaning resides in the text, it is clear to me that literature is 'about' the desire for some kind of contact with someone or something. Whether that contact comes in the form of what Martin Buber so eloquently describes an 'I-it' or an 'I-Thou' relationship...."

What you wrote there was uncannily close to my own view of what literature and teaching are all about. The more I teach, the more I sympathize with Jane Thompkins that what we actually do and create in the classroom is as important - if not more important - than what the content of the texts we teach is. The literary texts are occasions for a group of people to come together - to share a special space in this very stressful, competitive, often brutal world. It's a space where marvelous things can happen between the people gathered there. Or it can be a space which simply recreates that world outside with all its cruelty and inhumanity. Here, in our very class, we have an extraordinary collection of people whose paths normally would not have crossed...learning from and talking to each other.

How might this so "literary" technique of letter writing apply to those who do not teach in the humanities? I can't answer easily, but I imagine that there are numerous ways in which scientists, for example, exchange information in epistolary modes, and which students could emulate in a pedagogical exercise. My English Department colleague, Jeanne Fahnestock, a specialist in the rhetoric of science writes that,

In the early seventeenth century all critical communication among "scientists" was done by letter. The Royal Society, beginning in 1660, had a secretary who managed the society's correspondence and who encouraged exchanges. When the first English science periodical began, *The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, it was basically a collection of excerpts from the letters the secretary, Henry Oldenburg, had received and solicited. These excerpts preserve the conventions of letter writing. Even today, the prestigious British science weekly *Nature* publishes its research reports as "Letters to Nature" though the epistolary conventions are no longer there, except that the first paragraph is the abstract. Darwin of course kept up a fantastic correspondence - as did most Victorians. And it was by letter that he heard from Wallace and learned that someone else had had the same theory.⁵

But aside from similarities and differences between the humanities and sciences in modes of teaching and learning, allow me to return to the larger philosophical question: What is the entire purpose of "our" - from physicist to engineer to mathematician to literary critic - collective endeavor here at the University? To create, protect, and transmit knowledge, we will say. And to prepare students for careers in the professions and to be the next generation of scholars. Yes, of course. But I am asking: And what is that for ultimately? Is it not for - and please excuse what might sound platitudinous - to create a better human community in all ways, physical, mental,

spiritual, ecological . . . fill in your own set of adjectives here. So how do we each find a way to make sure that our classroom practice *itself* embodies that goal?

Now I also imagine you are wondering why I don't simply set up an electronic e-mail class discussion list, and dispense with all the xeroxing, paper shuffling, and time it takes to read and discuss letters in class. The answer is: precisely because e-mail lacks the embodied, personal "face to face" of a physical letter, read and held and spoken about with the author present. Of course, that lack of the "face to face" is part of the mystique of e-mail: you sit behind the protective anonymity and distance of the screen, even as you connect instantly across thousands of miles. Your writing is quick, light, and evanescent - it flies off and disappears into cyberspace. It's exhilarating, but also how treacherous - as many of us know, having zipped off messages we later regretted. It's so easy and tempting to hit "send," but then our words are suddenly irretrievable. Our e-mail boxes are now flooded with junk mail and many of the electronic discussion lists contain so much excess verbiage and trivia that we end up not saving, but wasting time. And as much as we still get that little thrill when the message "you have mail" pops up on our screen, it can't compare to receiving an actual, physical, personal letter, holdable in one's hands, savable, savored and sometimes caressed many times in the re-reading.

So in my classes, the accumulating file of letters grows over the semester into a large "Class Book." A collective creation we have all had a part in. A tangible, weighty, three-dimensional "monument" of our entire interaction together. I then use this whole file of letters to put the course together at the end of the semester. During the last week, I do not assign any new reading (which students, so overwhelmed during that period with paper and exams, rarely will do anyway) but instead I ask them to re-read the entire packet of letters from the beginning, and to write a Review Letter. Here are the directions: "Pick a few quotes from other students' letters that have been especially meaningful to you, and a few of your own. Then copy those with the author's name and date, and some paragraphs of commentary about why you picked those. Make copies for the whole class. We will read them aloud together in class." I, of course, also write one.

I created this assignment after reading somewhere an essay on teaching in which the writer emphasized that the class needs time during the course of the semester to stop the breathless rush to "cover all the material," to pause and reflect, to see how far they've come and how far they have to go, and to iron out their problems and celebrate their accomplishments. Just as in a long car trip, we have to get out and stretch our legs, stop at a scenic overlook, enjoy the view, check the map, have some refreshment. So I do a mid-term collective evaluation of how we are doing as a class; what we are doing well and not so well and ask what adjustments to make. This mid-term evaluation is done collectively in class. And it is here is that I have found e-mail to be especially effective as a kind of "back channel": I also ask each student to write me a private e-mail message about how she or he thinks they are doing in class, what problems they may have, what kind of feedback they might like from me. Then I answer, again via e-mail personally. These are the kinds of questions and comments that are often easier for students to write anonymously rather than have to say face to face. And I can also interject words of support or critique or make observations about their classroom behavior that would be hard to say orally.

The Review Letter then comes at the end. This final letter is always a highlight of the semester. The students are amazed to see all the work they have done, how they have grown, what the whole weave of voices has sounded like. And it is a time when they acknowledge so gracefully and eloquently what they learned from each other, a

time of mutual affirmation and celebration.

For the full flavor of this exercise, I take the liberty of quoting at length from two final Review Letters from a recent semester (Spring, 1997). The first is from English 602, the introductory graduate course on "Literary Criticism and Critical Contexts"; the second from an undergraduate honors seminar on "The Bible and Literary Criticism."

Dear Class:

You know this has been an interesting semester. After being pretty successful last semester, I walked into this class feeling pretty confident - one might say my head was inflated about three times too big. As you know, that confidence left quickly. What set in was nothing short of hammering doubt. I mean, even my first letter was asking those big important questions like "So what" and "What's the point, really?" I had come to that point where I was wondering if I was here even for the right reasons. And as the semester continued, these questions didn't subside. They just got deeper and deeper, being added to by overwhelming reading loads, and a carnivalesque personal life that I won't even begin to get into here, and this growing sense that I wasn't doing anything I cared about. I had found myself out to be the kind of "performer" that Jane Thompkins writes about (Am I smart? Tell me I'm smart) [He goes on to review his first letters on literary theories].

. . . So you're all pretty tired of listening to my self-indulgent, angst-ridden drivel about how (Insert melodramatic voice and gesture set here) I can't really be me. I just wanna be me!!! (End melodrama set.) But this is the point in my letter where I started to read what you guys were doing. While I'm stuck in the "I can't stop playing the role of the smart guy," you are all talking to me about the same stuff that I'm looking for. On March 17th Carolyn wrote about the separation between creative and non-creative writers as discussed by Robert Scholes. She said, "It's a stigma to be a 'creative writer,'" and even though Carolyn, as a legitimate M.F.A. candidate, has more of a reason to be slighted by this separation than I do, she's getting at the same point - creativity is about being human, having anxieties and turbulence and that whole storm brewing inside you that occasionally whips up something magnificent. And somehow, all this impersonal theory stuff was robbing me of that, or I was giving it away. I forget sometimes that it matters.

And it does matter. People have stakes in what we read, how we see the world, how we look at one another, because those are all implicit in the act of reading. Lynn's passionate discussion on the need for her own canon a couple of weeks ago reminded me of that. We read because we're looking for ourselves, not a faceless model of epistemology. On March 10 Lynn wrote to Gloria Anzaldua [a contemporary Chicano-American writer we had read] saying, "As an African-American woman (Dare I call myself a black feminist?), I am perplexed about how to fight what so many say are just harmless words.' But you and I know there is nothing harmless about them. As you say in your essay, linguistic identity is self-worth. We are our language." And I think through her words two weeks ago, we can perhaps append to that - We are our language and our literature.

Marina wrote a week later (3/17), "I look for the voice not granted to the wife, the mother, the daughter soon-to-be wife and mother, the servant, the intimate same gender friend and I try to recreate a literature where they are given voice

and are important enough to notice and identify with." She closes her letter with "Someday I hope not to have to read each text through a lens of resistance." And therein lies the difference. It's always been easy for me, I guess. I'm only a few adjectives away from being a dead, white, upper-class, wealthy, heterosexual, Christian-raised, educated, Western society, northeastern male. There aren't many texts that I can't read and readily find something to latch onto. But they do touch other people

We read, we write, I am here in graduate school, because it matters. It matters that we as a group are trying to create spaces for people who are not often given those spaces to speak. We are not only "teaching like it matters," we are also reading and writing like it matters. And I suppose, after all of this yammering and speculating on the nature of my own hammering doubt, I've forgotten to do anything like it matters.

Thank you for all being beautiful individuals. You have made my semester important, and I can only hope I can offer you the same.

Dear Class:

We've chatted long and hard about the Old Testament and discovered more ways than I thought possible to look at it. We talked of good and evil and love and humanity, and almost all of creation. We've looked at families and gender and cycles of forgiveness. And perhaps some of us are in agreement with Jan's statement about the Bible, that "it is not supposed to make sense." But that's exactly why it does make sense. We can look at it from any angle and see a semblance of ourselves in its reflection of the world. We find connection (and in a small way, comfort) by that recognition. And that's the marvel. That's why so many millions of people have turned to it, and continue to turn to it.

While I started out the semester asking, "What is the meaning of life?" and I'm not necessarily any closer to the answer, I've learned more ways to search for it.... it comes down to us to judge ourselves. We may all be "tools" in a master plan. Or there may truly be free will. We may all be doomed to isolation and failure - no character in the entire Bible exists without suffering, and an occasional mistake. Even the "upright and blameless" Job must bear his share. Whatever the truth of reality is (which we have no way to ultimately determine) it is only ourselves that we can hold accountable . . . We lose things when we lose track of ourselves. The Bible is one way of finding ourselves. Our connections with the characters, our instincts to fill in the spaces by relating what we would feel or think, that is what provides meaning, what unifies us all as humans.

We often cannot make sense of the data of our lives, because like Jacob who doesn't know how to reconcile himself with what he's done because "he's done something that is greater than his awareness of himself. He has moved into his destiny" (Hugh O'Donnell), we cannot always see past our present knowledge to the changes that are occurring in our being. We can only take Pam's interpretation of Eve to heart and realize that not just the serpent, but God and ourselves are "necessary to the realization of our purpose: to live."

Parker Palmer, in his book on education, *To Know as We Are Known*, talks much as I (and these students) have about "community," but also about the "spiritual dimension"

of teaching. That is something we so rarely mention, but which, I will admit, lies at the base of my own commitment as a teacher. There is a Jewish mystical principle called "nothingness in the middle" [*ayin b'emtzah*]. The idea is that for any new thing to be created, or to attain any new level, there first has to be an emptiness, a nothingness, a space created for the new thing to enter. In Jewish mysticism, the theory is that God did not create the world through an act of self-expansion but through a series of contractions of the divine light [*tzimtzum*]. There could be no universe without an empty space cleared first. So too with any act of creation, we have to let go, contract ourselves. To get from one step of the ladder to the next, you have to let go. In the middle, between stages, there is then, a temporary "nothingness" which is very disconcerting. That is also what happens when one attempts to learn something new.

I have found that for me, *tzimtzum* or, "contraction" is what makes for good teaching. The teacher has to contract his or her self to make a space for the student. Teaching with letters does exactly that. A student in an undergraduate class once wrote a Review Letter in which she thanked me for teaching the class in that way and said, "Your leadership, or lack of (?), has allowed all of us to do a lot of mental and spiritual growing." I was delighted. The "or lack of (?)" is exactly the point. She was talking about my Contraction, the space created.

"To teach," says Parker Palmer, "is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." And truth, he defines as a kind of,

'troth' - a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder The true work of the mind . . . is to reconnect us with that which would otherwise be out of reach, to reweave the great community of our lives."⁶

But shouldn't I more appropriately end with a quote from a student letter? Haven't their voices been so much more eloquent than mine here? This last is from a Naval Academy midshipman, an aviator working on an M.A. in English with hopes of teaching someday. He writes to a very left-wing student with whom he had been arguing all semester about whether or not there were "transcendent and universal" values in the traditional classics of Western literary tradition:

. . . there have been moments when I truly needed literature to teach me by forcing - or allowing me to adopt other perspectives. If life is a spiritual journey, then good literature...speeds things up a little....This is the legacy I wish to leave to my midshipmen. Not the answers to things life will bring them, but a love of good books, so that when life does kick in their doors, they will at least have an idea of where to start looking for answers. I'm sorry if that seems screamingly idealistic, but that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Me too.

On November 20, 1997, a few months after I completed this essay, Mary Alice Delia, who helped and inspired me to develop this technique of letter writing, passed away after a four-year battle with leukemia. I dedicate this essay to her with love. In her honor, I append the text I wrote from Jerusalem where I was on a Fellowship, for

"This is how I have decided, and it is a universal law: each generation has its interpreters, its economic guides, its political leaders. Until now, you have had your share of service before Me: now, your time is over and it is your disciple Joshua's turn to serve Me." Moses answered: "Lord of the world, if I am dying because of Joshua, I shall go and be his disciple." And God replies: "Do as you desire!"

The story continues: Moses rose early and went to the Joshua's door, where Joshua was sitting interpreting the divine word. Moses was standing where Joshua did not see him. The children of Israel appeared at Moses' door to study and learn with him. They asked, "Where is Moses our Teacher?" and were told he had gone to Joshua's door. They went and found him and saw Joshua sitting and Moses standing, and asked Joshua what was happening, for teacher is usually the one who sits and the students are those who stand.

No sooner did Joshua look up and see Moses than he tore his garments, wept and cried "Teacher Teacher! Father! Father! Teacher!" The children of Israel then asked Moses to teach them the Divine Word, but he demurred: "I do not have permission." They said to him: "Do not leave us." A voice then came from Heaven saying: "Learn from Joshua. Agree to sit down and learn from Joshua." Joshua sat in the head position and Moses sat at his right. Joshua interpreted the law before Moses.

The moment Joshua said, "Blessed is He who chooses among the righteous," the methodological and pedagogical rules of wisdom were taken from Moses and given to Joshua. And Moses no longer understood what Joshua was interpreting. After the lesson, the children of Israel asked Moses to give them what would be the concluding words of the Bible, but he replied "I do not know what to tell you." And Moses stumbled and fell. Then Moses said to God "Until now I asked for my life, but now my soul is given to you."

Mary Alice, you too, were our teacher. Like Moses in this story, it must have been so painful for you to have stop teaching, to leave your students, to have to withdraw, not to go all the way to the Promised Land. In order to hold on, Moses was willing to abandon his role as teacher and become his student's student. But that perhaps is the way of any great teacher. Both the way a teacher begins to learn how to be a teacher, and the way a teacher ends her career as a teacher. For you, Mary Alice, also taught me that a good teacher is always the student of her students. Trying to understand them, worrying about them, learning from them. You were my student and my teacher. And you still are and always will be. And now, your soul too is given to God.

I wrote to your husband Frank after hearing news of your passing: "I feel very privileged to have known Mary Alice. I will never forget her. Here in Jerusalem, the focus of so much spiritual yearning, so much agonizing history, so many hopes for a future redemption, one somehow feels the presence of those who have passed on . . . heaven is a little closer to earth here. After Mary Alice became ill, I always included her in my prayers. I will continue to remember her soul. You took wonderful care of her. May her memory always be a source of joy and blessing for all of us."

Love,
Susan

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Endnotes

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